

The Songs of Multiculturalism

by Lakshmi Persaud

at the College of Science, Technology & Applied Arts,

Trinidad & Tobago.

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Multiculturalism has become a world wide phenomenon. People are grappling with it. On September 3rd 2006, the Sunday Times letter page carried this caption: The Mess of multiculturalism. On August 22nd the Financial Times published an article by the winner of the 1998 Nobel prize for Economics, Amartya Sen. Its caption was: Multiculturalism: an unfolding tragedy of two confusions. Why has multiculturalism become a dire tragedy for some, a confusion, a perplexity or dilemma for others? The reasons are many and profound. I believe it is because the word means different things to different people. This evening we shall try and see whether the confusion surrounding the idea of multiculturalism can be better understood and whether one can create a formula which will enable it to open its large chest of blessings to those seeking the good life.

What does multicultural mean? By itself, it means many cultures. The problem arises however, when we lift the word from its own comfortable abode and attach it to describe a society, a multicultural society. What does it mean? What should it mean?

In order to understand the nature of the problem let us examine how varied, perceptions are. At one end of the spectrum, multiculturalism means several cultures inhabiting one country, its citizens living within their culture of birth intact, there being little meaningful interaction with other cultures, except where meeting the other is inevitable as in hospitals, shops, the open market, buses, trains and schools. This absence of a worthwhile interaction between cultures, this separation of cultures suggests, it is not a multicultural society; it is one with multi monocultures.

At the other end of the spectrum, lies the belief that the carriers of the host culture or where that has been destroyed, of the dominant culture, declare that whoever comes after them, must deny their DNA, dispense with their culture inherited at birth, and so lose themselves and all that they have reason to value and become mimic men, that is cultural clones of the first arrivals.

This painting of all of humanity in one shade, its proponents say, is an essential requisite to nationhood, but in truth, it is a requisite only for their perception of nationhood. Such a design sets out to create one culture and should be called a monoculture. It is not multiculturalism. It is assimilation. We are all pureed into a oneness of texture, colour and substance.

The combination of inherent fears and mistrust of other arrivals, of the unfamiliar, of the other, as well as perceptions and illusions of what one's culture should be, makes enjoying a healthy multiculturalism, a formidable task.

What is a healthy multicultural society? How can we attain a sustainable multicultural society of value?

We are well aware that when we travel abroad. We will encounter peoples with different languages, dress, religion, foods, jewellery, music and dance. Dissimilarities will also be visible in their preferences and tastes for goods and services which would be unlike our own. In London alone there are at least forty languages spoken, accompanied by their cultures.

How therefore should we live in these large bazaars of differences? We cannot choose wisely if we do not know what is available. The first step is to try our best to understand our culture of birth, for we owe the culture of self, carried by our DNA, by our inheritance, this minimum courtesy to understand it well, i.e. to its fullest. You must be aware that it is the culture that has adapted itself through time, encountering droughts and floods, wars and destruction, diseases and famines, yet enabled you to be here. Your past is within you. To deny it is to make less of yourself. One must glean from it what one has reason to value, and lay to rest, what once played a useful role but is no longer applicable to our rapidly changing environment. Secondly it is good practice to make courtesy calls to neighbours; in our context here, I mean we try to understand the cultures of our neighbours; we do so with the same affection, care and enthusiasm that we took to our own discovery.

The second part of the narrative of acquiring a sustainable multiculturalism of value is to have the tools for choosing, when the knowledge of other cultures is before you. The tools necessary for choosing are those of judgement, of discernment, of reasoning, of reflection, these will enable you to make better choices and so be better equipped to design your own individual culturalism. In it would be what you have chosen to have, not pressured to have from the cultures you encounter daily, from your culture of birth, or from governments.

This tailored individual culturalism will reflect your informed choices, your considered choices, your preferences, which in turn mirror the quality of life you wish to experience. You would then be moving from an old concept which says you must discover your identity and hold it in time, to one that says, your identity, your substantial self, your dharma is what you have chosen it to be, It is your preferred choice. There will however be a need for reassessment from time to time when all around you is in constant flux.

But to be able to make informed choices one must acquire the essential requisites for living the good life, the considered life— those tools of discernment mentioned— for without them we will be ill equipped to choose and so easily become prisoners of ignorance, of naivety, slaves to the sweet talkers, imprisoned by seducers, the cunning, the persuasive, those with domineering personalities or be captured by unbridled religious or secular power. And this is exactly what enlightened parents and teachers have been trying to assist us with: How to choose wisely, especially today, when both an unprecedented freedom and an unparalleled variety of goods, services, ideas, and life styles come together. Such an assemblage on offer, places untold pressures upon you and so indirectly upon your parents and teachers.

I need to mention another culture which is a modern phenomenon and which began to show its highly seductive self at the end of the last Century. This culture will either assist you in what we have been discussing or severely impede you. It is the wide range of electronic entertainments, accompanied by its first cousin the “Virtual World.” One is aware of the freedoms of the internet such as chat rooms and the dangers, the inexperienced young, are exposed to, as well as, the ability of bloggers to destroy the character of anyone they choose to pick on.

However, the very principle we have been discussing, of first becoming as fully informed as one possibly can, then bringing the ability of judgement, of discernment to bear upon the known facts, holds true for choosing wisely whatever one may be considering, be it customs, habits, beliefs and

styles whether they are new or old, it also holds true whether the communication of a culture is by the spoken word, books or the electronic media. This formula we have been exploring, though it can only be put together with effort, zeal and a strong wish to have one's life directed by the finest informed minds, I cannot think of another way to make the most of one's short life. In this way you would have created your own individual culture from the multicultures around you.

And so the nub of the question again returns: How to choose wisely, how to make sustainable choices from amongst the old, the post Industrial and the more recent cultures on offer. And here is where school and universities should play a seminal role. The wide range of subjects in the sciences and the arts, if well taught, will gradually develop our ability to acquire the tools of discernment, and with time to think for ourselves. This is the beginning of true freedom, the very essence of education.

In the fullest sense of the word, education is the only tool we have to assist us in acquiring judgement and with the years—wisdom, for education, not merely rote learning, helps us to understand this complex world. The subjects we study at schools and university are not composite wholes; they are small manageable pieces of a larger subject—the understanding of our environment in its totality, how does life on the planet behave and why; hence the inter-action and inter-relatedness of all knowledge.

To recap a little, for I wish to emphasize the need to have a profound, thoughtful perception for living wisely, for making informed choices, for in essence it is what this lecture is about and in addition, how to obtain it. Without it we perish and our lives become mere shadows of our immense inherent possibilities. There was a time when the perception of the finest scholars of our planet was, that the Earth was flat, that we were the centre of the universe, that the stars moved but we were still. That there was in the far beyond, and all around us only what we could see. Man's understanding, his perception of the world, has since moved on. With the invention of the microscope and the telescope and the development of X-ray images on a photographic plate, we now see as never before.

What sort of world would it have been if such perceptions were still held? Consider the implication of this for all branches of knowledge, and you begin to comprehend the necessity to perceive well. But here I warn; we do not yet know what perceptions we now hold, that the future will say are false; this awareness should influence our attitude to all knowledge, to all beliefs both our own and those of others. We ought therefore not to be dogmatic.

More recently with the invention of the internet and websites, the lap top, mobile phone, BlackBerry and ipod, we are offered a freedom to communicate, to learn and discover with a measure of ease that would have even recently, been in the realm of wishful thinking.

The present confusion with multiculturalism is to be expected. It arises in part from the ongoing tensions brought about by the conservatism of those whose vested interests are being challenged by change. There are also the added new freedoms that the information technology enabled. When all these choices are before us, and if we are unable to choose wisely, confusion and depression will set in.

It is the inability of the older and the younger generations to make informed choices that from time to time result in dire human tragedies. And this is where the all important roles of enlightened parenting and teaching and schools and universities should come to the fore. In truth we have no choice but to strive to make informed choices, to work hard at improving our perceptions, to have a better understanding of ourselves and of others; what awaits us, if prejudices, ignorance and arrogance

prevail and our perceptual error goes uncorrected, is our own demise. I shall close with a quotation which conveys this in a hilariously vivid, yet telling way.

“The man who regularly mistakes his wife for a hat (or worse his hat for a wife) is headed for extinction.” Nicholas Humphrey. Chap 6 of 'The Artful Universe' by John Barrow.

Wittgenstein warns that “the limits of my language mean the limits of my world.” I would like to replace the word language with the more comprehensive word – culture, knowing that the essence of his statement remains, so it now reads: The limits of my culture mean the limits of my world.

If one would only take a moment to look at our living environment, what strikes us, is its variety, be it with plants or animals or substances, viruses or parasites, or planets or stars, be it colour or form. Our Cosmos and our planet within it, is a song about the Infinite, the Infinite in all its possible variations, why should we then lose our DNA, our unique individuality, which will reflect itself in its preferred choices. We are a small island and our population is small, our enrichment lies in a genuine, sustainable, cultural variety or we stagnate and fade.

What I hope I leave with you is the necessity for us all to prepare ourselves to make informed choices and that we try to inculcate values and preferences that will sustain us through thick and thin, from youth through to old age when we are frail, when we are sans everything, for our identity is not only a matter of our inheritance at birth. Our identity is not a given. Yes, you were offered at birth a culture that has helped you to be here today, and that you should honour and have an appropriate regard for, as you would your parents, but that larger you, your identity, your wholeness, your dharma, what you are in essence, lies in your hands, it lies with your creativity. Your karma was always your making. This is another way of saying so. Now you must acquire the skills and clarity of perception that will help that creativity to be a beautiful one, beautiful in its substance, in its philosophy, in its meaning. May all the spirits of good will walk with you.